

# The Republican Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

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## Body

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It was not so long ago that a young congresswoman proposed major climate legislation that would transform the national energy system and, with it, the economy. Speaking on the floor of the House, she lamented the tens of billions of dollars in federal handouts to the fossil fuel industry and the government's failure to adopt its own scientists' recommendations. She warned of the "very high risk of irreversible and catastrophic impact looming on the horizon" if the United States failed to act.

"We have the facts," she said. "The crisis is here. The time to move from rhetoric into action is also here."

The congresswoman was Claudine Schneider, a Republican from Rhode Island. The bill was the Global Warming Prevention Act of 1988.

Her Rhode Island counterpart, the Republican Senator John Chafee, introduced the bill simultaneously in the Senate. There it joined a bill filed by the Democrat Max Baucus of Montana and the Republican Robert Stafford of Vermont ("For too long, those who warned about global climate change were thought of as radicals warning about the end of the world," Mr. Stafford said, "but 1988 is a taste of things to come") and the most prominent bill of all, the National Energy Policy Act of 1988, introduced by Senator Timothy Wirth, Democrat of Colorado. In all, 32 climate bills were introduced that year, the culmination of efforts begun by a handful of scientists and activists a decade earlier to prevent catastrophic climate change.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ed Markey's proposal for a Green New Deal has been called a political "loser," a "green dream" and "pie in the sky" -- and that's just from prominent Democrats. But 30 years ago, transformative climate legislation was widely understood to be sensible. Mr. Wirth's bill was co-sponsored by 13 Democrats and five Republicans; Ms. Schneider's had 39 co-sponsors. The phony pragmatism of incremental strategies to address climate change now surfacing on Capitol Hill may be less insidious than denialism but is nearly as farcical.

The Green New Deal is a statement of principles and goals; the Schneider and Wirth bills were detailed legislative packages, the products of negotiation and compromise. Yet the 1988 bills were in certain aspects more ambitious. Instead of calling for the end of carbon emissions, they pushed to decrease the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Mr. Wirth's bill would have mandated a 20 percent reduction from 1988 levels, bringing the carbon dioxide concentration below what was found in the earliest readings taken by Charles David Keeling at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii in 1958, all the way down to about 280 parts per million. Today it measures above 412 parts per million.

The 1988 legislation also included a major foreign policy agenda, calling for the establishment of an International Global Agreement on the Atmosphere, investments to help developing countries reduce emissions and mechanisms to withhold foreign aid to countries that failed to transition toward renewable energy -- economic

sanctions for climate inaction. The Wirth bill promoted an expansion of nuclear power, which is not mentioned by the Green New Deal, and both the Wirth and Schneider bills emphasized an issue now taboo across the political spectrum: population control.

Like the Green New Deal, the 1988 bills were calculated to shape the debate in the years to come. "I don't believe it's going to pass tomorrow," Mr. Wirth said at the time. "You can throw up your hands and say, 'Well, there's no way we can do it,' or you can dig in and whack away at it." Ms. Schneider felt the same way. When she reintroduced the bill in 1989 it received more than a hundred additional sponsors, and ultimately several sections did pass, increasing the research and development budget for energy-efficiency programs by 30 percent.

But by then the public debate had been derailed -- by the oil and gas industry's campaign to poison any effort to pass climate policy and to question the decade-old scientific consensus; by President George H.W. Bush's economic council, which had come out in force against emissions reductions; and by right-wing congressional Republicans. Negotiations for a binding global treaty fell apart and the Persian Gulf war began.

In the years that followed, climate policy became an afterthought, then a partisan issue, then a casualty of the Republican Party's delirious embrace of industry propaganda and self-delusion -- until now, when it has become a matter of life and death.

Claudine Schneider recently told me that she was "grateful" to the Green New Deal for "raising the level of dialogue." She is enthusiastic about the opportunity for the new House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis to hold public hearings, for the education not only of the public but also of members of Congress.

"The current Republicans, with their lies, denial of science, denial of the truth, do not deserve to be in office," she said. "Pragmatism has to be the guiding light. When it comes to climate, the only pragmatic choice for the nation's economy and the planet is to act now."

Timothy Wirth shares her enthusiasm about the Green New Deal. The turning point in the public conversation, Mr. Wirth believes, came after the midterm election when students from the Sunrise Movement staged a protest in Nancy Pelosi's office to demand a Green New Deal. Ms. Ocasio-Cortez joined them, giving a passionate speech in their defense.

"That was the catalytic moment," Mr. Wirth told me. "It changed the emotion. It made you think, 'Wow, we're going to do this.' It made you think that this time was different."

This time is different. The Green New Deal, and the youth movement that helped produce it, has absorbed a critical lesson from the past 40 years of failed efforts to advance climate policy. Until now, activists and politicians have offered, over and over again, versions of the same argument: The science is clear; we know what we have to do; the longer we wait, the worse it will be for us; it's foolish not to act.

You can find this argument in a 1979 report sent to President Jimmy Carter by four of the nation's pre-eminent earth scientists warning that the disruptions from climate change "are sufficiently great to warrant the incorporation of the CO<sub>2</sub> problem into all considerations" of energy policy; in the 1988 congressional hearing when Gus Speth, president of the World Resources Institute, said that "responsible" leaders "have no choice but to treat this threat as a real one, as an urgent threat, as one requiring serious responses, serious policy changes, and changes not in the distant future but in the near term"; and in 2006, in "An Inconvenient Truth," when Al Gore wrote that "unless we take quick action the consequences for our planetary home could become irreversible."

This is the appeal to reason. Its logic is unimpeachable. But it has had limited political success. And its power of persuasion has only diminished since the Republican Party declared total war on the scientific method, objective fact, reality.

The leaders of the new wave of climate activism have echoed the appeal to common sense. But their emphasis has shifted. If we fail to act, not only will we be foolish but, as Ms. Ocasio-Cortez recently put it, "we will have blood on our hands."

The Green New Deal may be short on policy detail, but it does establish the foundation of a moral doctrine: The conviction that there can be no civil society without a stable climate, that the power of American workers has eroded even faster than our coastlines, that inequality increases with every fraction of a degree of warming. It declares that the working class, women, people of color, indigenous communities, migrants, people with disabilities and future generations are no less deserving of a survivable future than the wealthiest members of the wealthiest nation.

This marks a profound turning point, not only in political messaging but also in our understanding of the scale of what we're up against. It is this message -- not airplane bans or "farting cows" or a Stone Age redux -- that terrifies the powerful and the complicit. It is moral clarity, in the United States of 2019, that passes as radical.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/20/opinion/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-green-new-deal.html>

## Graphic

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PHOTO: Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts, right, both Democrats, rolling out their Green New Deal proposal for combating climate change. (PHOTOGRAPH BY PETE MAROVICH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

## Classification

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